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JOHN BLACK**

ON A DAY in March, 1913, a little girl, playing with her companions in the village of St. Pierre on a tributary of the Missouri river, found a strange leaden tablet. Since another day in March, one hundred and seventy years before, it had been buried in the bank of that little stream, near where the public school was to stand. This tablet bore the arms of France, and an inscription scratched with the keen point of a dagger, which declared that these lands were the possession of Louis, King of France. And there still remains the signature of the discoverer, Chevalier de la Verendrye, the first white man to come into the West.

On a day in May, 1670, seventy-three years before Chevalier de la Verendrye laid claim to the north-west of the continent of America, King Charles of England signed a charter, making Prince Rupert, and the gentlemen adventurers of the Hudson's Bay Company, "the true lords and proprietors" of that same vast, uncharted territory. The story of La Verendrye, the Hudson's Bay

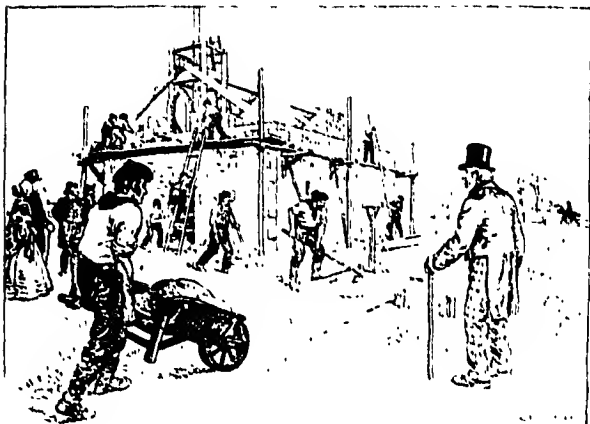
CANADIAN HISTORY READERS

Company, and the North-West Company. the tales of colonizing adventure under Selkirk, and the coming of the missionaries, records filled with heroism and romance—these you may read in other booklets of this series.

When recalling the stirring deeds of the founders of the West there are no names more illustrious than those of the pioneer missionaries—Robert Terrill Rundle—first missionary to cross the plains; George and John MacDougall, pathfinders of the plains; James Evans, “The man who taught birch-bark how to talk; John Black, “apostle of the Red River;” Father Lacombe, “the black-robed voyageur,” and many others who deserve immortality.

The Selkirk settlement on the Red River was principally Scotch, and they cherished their Gaelic traditions. In spite of great sufferings they had become more or less reconciled to the hardships and privations of that pioneer life, except in one thing. They were ministered to by the priest of St. Boniface parish as well as the Anglican and

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THE BOULDER FROM WHICH JOHN BLACK FIRST PREACHED IN THE FIELDS AT KILDONAN IS STILL PRESERVED AS A FITTING MEMORIAL TO THE APOSTLE OF RED RIVER. THE KILDONAN CHURCH WAS BUILT OF STONE, QUARRIED AT STONY MOUNTAIN. THE CONSTRUCTION WORK BEING PERFORMED BY THE STURDY SCOTS AS A LABOR OF LOVE. THE CHURCH WAS COMPLETED IN 1883. ALTHOUGH IT COST \$5,500, A FORTUNE TO SUCH PIONEERS, NOT A PENNY WAS OWING WHEN THE WORK WAS FINISHED.

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Methodist missionaries, but it was not the same as being served by a real minister of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. The Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, the Earl of Selkirk, even the Roman Catholic Bishop of St. Boniface, joined with the Scotch settlers in urging that a Presbyterian missionary should be sent. Governor succeeded governor; Lord Selkirk died of a broken heart in Southern France. Thus the years came and went, and still the loyal settlers of Kildonan had no minister from the auld kirk.

In ancient times it used to be said that, where a man was required for any work of special importance, "the Lord raised up so and so." It is about as good a way to state it as any. The special fitness of these men and women for their tasks seemed to indicate that Providence had for a long time known that the need would arise, and that in the meantime He would be preparing some one to meet the need, when "the time was fulfilled." And so it was with this handful of

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loyal Presbyterians in Kildonan parish on the banks of the Red River.

Our story began far back in the days when La Salle and other discoverers thought that China was somewhere around the head of the Great Lakes. On an old map of 1800 A.D., there are even one or two continents missing altogether! And all over the unexplored territory is written, for want of information: "Here be Demons!" "Here be Sirens!" "Here be Savages that worship Devils!" When we left off in our narrative of the Canadian North-West, the eighteenth century was drawing to its close. All over the vast prairie, then known as Prince Rupert's Land, there were many signs that an era of great promise had dawned.

The scene now changes to the Highlands of Scotland, and not far from the Scottish Border, renowned in history and romance. Every boy and girl has known the glamor of Sir Walter Scott's border minstrelsy and his stirring tales of high adventure.

John Black, the future apostle of Red

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River, was born January 8, 1818. His parents were shepherds of Eskdale, and were descended from shepherds in Ettrick, famed for the Scottish poetry of James Hogg, the "Ettrick Shepherd."

Hogg assisted Sir Walter Scott in the collection of old ballads for the *Border Minstrelsy*, and some of these may have been the work of the Ettrick Shepherd. In after-years he himself wrote many Border ballads in a lively, captivating style, and was lionized in Edinburgh and London. The following lines with their rollicking lilt may tell the secret of his amazing popularity.

Come, all ye jolly shepherds
That whistle through the glen,
I'll tell ye of a secret
That courtiers dinna ken;
What is the greatest bliss
That the tongue o' man can name?
'Tis to woo a bonny lassie
When the kye* comes hame.

*Cows.

When the kye comes hame,
When the kye comes hame,
'Tween the gloamin' and the mirk
When the kye comes hame.

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The parish of Eskdale was a lonely, mountainous district, the humble homes of the shepherds being two or three miles apart. On week days the shepherds watched their flocks upon the steep slopes of the Scottish hills, and found plenty of time to think upon the deeper things of life. Indeed these humble folk were often well versed in the Bible and the best literature, and of course knew their catechism every word. Not a few of them beguiled the tedious hours with playing some musical instrument or by writing verses, one of them, "the Ettrick Shepherd," as we have seen, winning renown.

It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that from this hardy, thoughtful race there should come sons and daughters who were to take their place among the leaders of men.

When John was seven years of age the Blacks moved from Eskdale parish to Highmoor, twenty miles southward, where they took a sheep farm, 700 acres in extent. The land belonged to the Maxwell clan, and was only five miles from the little stream that

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divides England and Scotland. Every rod of ground was famous in fable and history. The little home on the heather-clad hills looked south toward the historic castles, where the dauntless Scottish chieftains held back the invaders, and toward the valleys where ebbed and flowed the fortunes of war in centuries long past. Farther south rose the high hills of Cumberland, Yorkshire and Durham with storied Skiddaw high over all. Eastward they could see the great Solway Firth, bright with the sails of many ships, and on a clear day the tall chimneys of Carlyle stood clear to view. Four miles away stood Ecclefechan, where Thomas Carlyle was born, and nearer still the farmstead which he had occupied for a time, and upon which still stood the "Tower of Repentance." It is little to be wondered, therefore, that John Black should have been stirred by the beauty about him, and that he, too, should write verses, some of which were published in the county paper, under the pen-name "Glenkirtle."

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IN APRIL 1852, WHEN THE ICE IN THE RED RIVER JAMMED, FLOODING THE PLAINS, THE SELKIRK SETTLERS FLED TO THE HILLS. THIS ILLUSTRATION SHOWS IN THE DISTANCE THE HAVOC WROUGHT TO HOMES AND HARVESTS. IT ALSO PORTRAYS A STURDY PEOPLE GATHERED AROUND DR. BLACK ON THE SABBATH, A SYMBOL OF THE ROBUST PIETY OF THE FOUNDERS OF KILDONAN.

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When eight years of age John went to the Gair School at the corner of his father's farm. The teacher was William Smith, whose son, Rev. Thomas Smith, was at one time minister at Kingston, Ontario. Mr. Smith was followed by John Roddick, the father of another Canadian, Dr. Richard Roddick, of Montreal. Under these capable teachers John Black made splendid progress, until his father was compelled to take the lad from school to assist in tending the sheep. After awhile he continued his studies and began the study of French, walking to Annan, nine miles away, to buy a grammar. He was very fond of languages, excelling in Latin, Greek and French. There was a small Library Association a mile distant, containing much good reading matter. Before John was twenty he had read most of the two score fat volumes of *Brewster's Edinburgh Encyclopaedia*, and possessed a fair knowledge of the great poets and philosophers.

When Black was just closing his teens the

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Gair School became vacant and he was asked to supply for a while. His success was so great that he later took a school in Cumberland.

He was now twenty-three. Meanwhile hard times had come to the Highmoor farm. At last it was decided that they should emigrate to America to mend their fortunes, which they did in the summer of 1841.

The Blacks settled near Bovina, Delamare county (U.S.A.), among the Catskill mountains, and took up mixed farming. John, who had long ago decided upon entering the Christian ministry, now cast about for some means of making his dreams come true. A vacancy fortunately occurred in a nearby school, which he filled with credit. Having saved a good share of his earnings he entered the small academy at Delhi, the county town. His success was remarkable. Upon graduating he delivered an original oration in Greek. John Black's cousins, William and David Murray, were room-mates. William became a Judge of the Supreme Court of

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New York State, while David founded the educational system of Japan, receiving from the Emperor the highest order of nobility. It is unlikely that these three Scottish lads, cooking their frugal food sent from home, in a tiny room which served for kitchen, dining-room, study and bedroom, ever dreamed of such high honours as were ultimately to crown them.

John Black, although an active worker in the Associate Presbyterian Church of Bovina, and a friend of the minister, Rev. John Graham, still felt that he could not conscientiously join the Church because it held as binding the ancient pledge of the Scottish Covenanters two centuries old. First he thought of entering Princeton College, but it was unsound on the slavery question. The idea of a Britisher and a Christian looking with toleration on slavery was unthinkable! Then he was invited by a minister from Canada, a friend of the family, to enter Queen's Theological College, Kingston,

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Ontario, but just then the famous disruption occurred in the Presbyterian Church, and another door had closed to him.

On November 5, 1844, Knox College, Toronto, opened in a room at Professor Esson's home, with two teachers and fourteen students. John Black was the first student. Here he studied for three years, winning several prizes. During his first summer vacation he went as missionary into new settlements and the next summer attended the French school at Pointe aux Trembles near Montreal, hoping to prepare himself for work among the French-Canadians. Graduating from Knox College, Black undertook missionary work among the French Roman Catholics, although many English-speaking congregations at the same time urged him to become their pastor. While still uncertain as to the proper course he should take, a call came which was to change the entire current of his destiny.

On June 27, 1851, Rev. Robert Burns,

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minister of Knox Church, Toronto, wrote the secretary of the French Canadian Missionary Society. His letter begins:

My Dear Sir: In the name of our Synod's Home Mission, and for behoof of our poor brethren at Red River in the Hudson's Bay Territory, I have to solicit your aid in obtaining for a time the services of Mr. John Black, whom we have fixed on as a fit person to make an exploratory visit to the settlement. . . .

Black firmly, but courteously, declined. Others were sought, but could not go. Finally there seemed no honourable way out and he accepted the task, its honours and hazards. He was ordained in Toronto, July 31, 1851, and the next day set out for Red River. "Nobody else would go," he wrote, "and so I am called on to do so."

John Black's journey took him by boat and stage-coach to the Falls of St. Anthony, now Minneapolis. Alexander Ramsay, Governor of Minnesota, was preparing to proceed northward for the purpose of negotiating a

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treaty with the Chippewas. Black joined the Governor's party. On September 19, nearing his destination, he decided to paddle down the Red River to the Selkirk settlement, being accompanied by a friend and two halfbreeds. It was a long journey, over 150 miles, and the birch-bark canoe, being overloaded and leaky, three days and two nights were required to make the trip. Bond, John Black's companion, wrote a description of the scene as the canoe swept down the Red River, past the settlers' humble homes, and the twin towers of the Cathedral of St. Boniface, from which swelled the peal of the vesper bells. This description, somehow or another, reached the Quaker poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, who has given us this well-known poem:

THE RED RIVER VOYAGEUR

Out and in the river is winding
The links of its long red chain,
Through belts of dusky pine land
And gusty leagues of plain.

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Only at times a smoke wreath
With the drifting cloud-rack joins—
The smoke of the hunting lodges
Of the wild Assiniboins!

Drearly blows the north-wind
From the land of ice and snow;
The eyes that look are weary,
And heavy the hands that row.

And with one foot on the water,
And one upon the shore,
The Angel of Shadow gives warning,
That day shall be no more.

Is it the clang of wild geese?
Is it the Indians' yell,
That lends to the voice of the north-wind
The tones of a far-off bell?

The voyageur smiles as he listens
To the sound that grows apace;
Well he knows the vesper ringing
Of the bells of St. Boniface;

The bells of the Roman Mission
That call from their turrets twain;
To the boatmen on the river,
To the hunter on the plain!

Even so in our mortal journey
The bitter north-winds blow,
And thus upon life's Red River
Our hearts, as oarsmen row.

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And when the Angel of Shadow
Rests his feet on wave and shore,
And our eyes grow dim with watching,
And our hearts faint at the oar,

Happy is he who heareth
The signal of his release
In the bells of the Holy City,
The chimes of eternal peace!

Black sought out the house of Sheriff Alexander Ross, who had been untiring in his efforts to secure a Scottish minister, and after a rousing welcome he made the Ross house his home. And so it came about that the Selkirk Settlement at Kildonan, after almost forty years of wistful waiting, had a minister from their own homeland in the Highlands of Scotland, and their own kirk under the shadow of Fort Garry, with its blood-red flag inscribed, H. B. Co.

John Black arrived at "Colony Gardens" on Friday, and on Sunday the joyful people of Kildonan made their way to St. John's Anglican Church. The news of Black's arrival spread rapidly during the following week, and some 300 gathered at the Kil-

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donan manse, Sunday, September 28, 1851, where the first sermon was preached by a Presbyterian minister in all Rupert's Land.

The entire population of the Red River Settlement at this time was about 5,500, composed of the Selkirk Highlanders, De Meurons or disbanded German mercenaries from the Napoleonic Wars, Swiss, French, English and Orkney half-breeds. The De Meurons and Swiss settled on the Seine and founded the parish of St. Boniface. The first parish, however, was Kildonan, named and allotted by Lork Selkirk himself in 1817, or thirty-four years before the minister arrived.

Seven weeks after the first memorable Sabbath the Kildonan parish elders, six in number, were chosen, Sheriff Ross being elected ruling elder. On December 7th the ordination of the elders took place, the first in the North-West. At this service a child of Richard Salter was baptized, the first christening ceremony of its kind the young minister had conducted, as well as the first

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Presbyterian to be registered in the West. On December 13, the Kildonan church observed its first Holy Communion, the first time in forty long years some of these Highlanders had sat at "the Lord's table."

The new parish was now well under way, but a suitable kirk had to be built. The Hudson's Bay Company donated the land and £100 in compensation for their interest in St. John's Church, but both congregations retained their former interests in the cemetery where slept their dead. The site chosen for the new church was at Frog Plain, to which was attached 300 acres of glebe land. Before winter set in the people had quarried at Stony Mountain, ten miles distant, sufficient limestone for their needs. Some of the stone was burnt for lime, the rest being piled ready for building in the spring. In April the ice broke up in the river, then jammed, and before the horrified settlers were scarcely aware of what was happening the angry floods swept over the banks. On May 10th the people fled, just as they had done on the same

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day twenty-six years before. Houses and barns floated away, and with them the meagre savings of 3,000 or 4,000 settlers.

These sturdy pioneers were not to be downcast, however, so when the flood abated they returned to sow their spring wheat, repair the damages, and build the church. Kildonan Church was finally completed in 1853, together with the manse, and although they cost about \$5,500, a considerable sum for them, not a penny was owing when the work was finished.

The ministry of John Black had been a triumph for himself and his people. The country was, as we have seen, a strange mixture of races and ideals. Added to this were the rival ambitions of the trading companies. Moreover, the Hudson's Bay Company, fearing unwholesome rivalry, had steadily opposed the founding of another denomination in the West, and the persistent demands of the Highlanders for one of their own threatened trouble. John Black came in spite of the Company.

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For one year and a half he laboured among the people, and when he returned to "Canada," all parties, and even the great Company, joined his own people in unforgettable expressions of good will. The Governor of Rupert's Land not only invited Black to call on him in Toronto, but donated sums of money for his work at Red River.

The church in the East was unsuccessful in finding a successor, if indeed they tried at all. Black, therefore, returned in great happiness about the end of October the same year, and entered upon his long and glorious ministry.

The Kildonan farms faced the river on either side, being very long, but so narrow that the houses stood close together like homes on a village street. Into these homes John Black went day after day, sharing the joys and sorrows of his people, beloved by all, Catholic and Protestant alike.

Scarcely had the church been built when a parish school was erected close by. Indeed, even before a school building could be

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put up, the York boats brought school books and ten large wall maps. "Our school," writes one of the settlers at this time, "will now be the best furnished in the settlement." The Anglicans and Roman Catholics each had their parish schools, supported by private subscriptions, and the Kildonan school, likewise receiving no aid from the Hudson's Bay Company, the owners and rulers of the country, had to depend for support on the people of the parish. Soon afterward three young men were sent to Toronto to complete their education, one later becoming a minister of the Presbyterian Church, and another, a son of Sheriff Ross, joining the editorial staff of the *Toronto Globe*.

Since his arrival at Kildonan John Black had lived at "Colony Gardens" with Sheriff Ross. Ross, a young man of twenty-one, had come to Canada in 1803 with other disbanded soldiers of the Highland regiment of Glengarry Fencibles, and settled in Glengarry on the St. Lawrence, part of the time being engaged as school teacher. Seven

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years later he joined the Astor Fur Company and, sailing from New York, rounded Cape Horn and proceeded up the Pacific coast to the Columbia River. Later he entered the service of the Northwest Fur Company and engaged in the fur trade in British Columbia. It was here in the mountains of British Columbia that he married the daughter of the chief of the Okanagan Indians. Ultimately he crossed the mountains and joined the colony on the Red River. He was made a sheriff by Governor Simpson, of the Hudson's Bay Company, and in addition to these duties was a leader in the social and religious life of the community.

The organization of his parish being well begun, the school and church both being well attended, John Black turned his attention to the manse which had remained unoccupied. He chose for himself a daughter of his parish, and none other than Henrietta Ross. This was perhaps inevitable, although the Highlanders at first gasped, for was not her mother a woman of the Okana-

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gan tribe? Henrietta Ross was a suitable companion for John Black. She was a tall, good-looking young woman, established in the faith of her father, and besides had the advantage of a splendid education. Three sons and three daughters were born to the manse. Mrs. Black died about twenty years later.

The years passed, full of labours and equally full of promise. As the population grew Black's opportunities for service also multiplied. He possessed a genius for friendship, and welded all elements in good will. Eloquent as a preacher, he was eloquent also in deeds of loving kindness. He gathered all the sons of Auld Scotia into the embrace of his affection, and no servant of the Company who had come from the land of heather, but would call at the Kildonan manse in passing through. Even the Hudson's Bay Company at last invited him to preach at Fort Garry, and this became historic as the first Presbyterian service on the present site of Winnipeg.

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From his earliest years John Black had been solicitous of the interests and feelings of others. When he left home his letters to his parents never failed. He wrote his brother, who followed him into the ministry, but who remained in the East, not to forget writing home, and to visit their aged parents as often as he could. It was natural, therefore, that, when his parish was organized, he should look beyond the boundaries of Kildonan for other hearts to conquer. And it was perhaps inevitable that his interest should turn in the direction of the native races on the plains. In season and out of season he urged the Church authorities in Toronto to send a missionary to the Indian tribes. Year after year they considered his request, commented favorably upon it—and did nothing.

However, in 1862, John Nisbet, an old class-mate at Knox College, arrived at Winnipeg and Black was overjoyed. Mission work had been going on among the Indians for over twenty years through the agencies

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of other Churches, and Black felt keenly the lack of similar undertakings on the part of the Presbyterians. But now that Nisbet had come all augured well. It was decided to commence work among the Plain Crees, a numerous, nomadic, yet highly intelligent, tribe, belonging to the Algonquin nation.

Nisbet lived at the Kildonan manse, and entered enthusiastically into all the enterprises of the parish. Most of the woodwork in the parish school he did himself. Two or three years after his arrival at Kildonan he married Mary McBeth, a daughter of one of the best families. It was at last agreed that the Indian mission should be stationed in the Saskatchewan country, and Nisbet, doubly endeared to the Kildonan settlement, set out with his bride and a generous gift from the people. It would be interesting to follow the work of this gallant and godly missionary, how he came at last to the north country and founded the settlement named after Queen Victoria's consort, Prince Albert, and the many other things he did, but we

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must leave him busy with his building and his Industrial School at Prince Albert, and return to John Black.

Great was his joy in having still another dream come true. Schools he had established, and now missions to the hinterland. Surely the harvest would be bountiful! Hordes of settlers came in quest of fortune and adventure. They poured in, and soon the mother parish of Kildonan saw about her many thriving young churches. Towns and villages sprang up everywhere as if by magic. Ministers were urgently needed to care for the new parishes. The call went out for men, ever more men! These were indeed proud days for John Black, the forerunner of his Church on the Red River. The pioneer of his faith in the wilderness, he had lived to see it grow numerous and strong, and himself a patriarch of the Presbyterian Church in Rupert's Land.

And then came talk of the union of the West with Canada. It is all a matter of history now; the story has been told before.

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Some desired it, others feared and fought it. Loftiest patriotism clashed with gross selfishness. Then came unnecessary haste and misunderstanding. The arrogance of Government officials and land surveyors sent to map out the territory, and determine the route of the Canadian Pacific Railway, roused the suspicions of the uninformed settlers and Indians. Were their lands and privileges to be filched from them? No satisfactory answer came. The missionaries strove to allay distrust and enmity, but before anyone was aware of what was happening, rebellion had broken out.

Through it all John Black had succeeded in preserving his usual independence. Favourable to union, he had the faculty of disarming opposition, and did much in persuading others to a like attitude of mind. So Rupert's Land joined the Dominion of Canada, and Winnipeg became the capital of a new and flourishing province. Still John Black remained on to serve the multiplying

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needs of the expanding community about him.

In the same year that the rebellion was suppressed, Rev. George Bryce reached Winnipeg to lay the foundation of Manitoba College. With the establishment of a Presbyterian college John Black's work seemed to have been crowned. The college stood near the Kildonan church, being built of logs covered with clapboards. The remarkable growth of the city of Winnipeg, however, and the fact that the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Methodist colleges were located near that flourishing centre, made it necessary to move the college.

The Kildonan settlement naturally wanted the college to remain. Had their minister not dreamed it and paved the way for it? Had not they sacrificed for it, and built it with their own hands? John Black saw clearly enough that the future success of the college depended upon its being moved, but he could not bring himself to take the lead in the matter. He would thereby bring sor-

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row to his people and this he dare not do. This shows possibly the single defect in John Black's character. His piety was as winsome as his honesty was rugged and unafraid. His eloquence could plead for the sorrowful and oppressed, and it could also flail the unrepentant and wayward. His mind was restless in the pursuit of truth, and his body was offered as a living, untiring sacrifice to all good works. But so eager was he to please all and give offence to none, that frequently it tied him hand and foot.

At first he declared against moving the college. Finally, when the change had been made, he gave the venture his blessing, and consented to teach in it. As a professor of church history John Black was a great success. He not only knew his subject thoroughly, but was also able to enthuse his students. And this he did along with his heavy parish duties and without pay. His reward came when, in 1877, Manitoba College, along with the other colleges, was incorporated into the University of Manitoba.

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It was also fitting that Queen's College, which he had thought of entering as a young man, should confer upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity.

Thirty years after his arrival at Kildonan, April, 1881, Dr. Black returned to Ontario and his old home in New York state for a well-earned vacation. On his way back to Winnipeg he caught a severe cold. While his interest in all the concerns of the parish was as keen as ever, his strength gradually ebbed until Sunday, February 12, 1882, when his noble and courageous spirit took its flight into the great beyond.

John Black was a humble minister of the Gospel, whose good fortune it was to be called to difficult tasks, and to have the courage to meet them. Most of his life was lived in sacrifice and loneliness. There is little to weave romance about, and to attempt such would be out of place. He represents many another who, through unswerving loyalty to his conscience and his God, toiling upward through the night, found upon the

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heights the morning breaking. For almost a third of a century he toiled at Kildonan, burying, it would seem, his splendid endowments out of sight. Men of dull vision and less courage would have retreated in the face of the loneliness and hardship. But John Black, who had, from the cottage at Highmoor, looked eastward to distant Solway Firth, and southward to the far-off Solway Skiddaw, could also clearly see through the approaching years the march of empire pressing westward across the plains. In confidence he toiled, and with no regret he laid him down just as the new day broke for Western Canada. Upon the educational, social and religious life of the West he left, in countless ways, the enduring mark of his noble vision and splendid spirit. And perhaps he would claim for himself no memorial greater than the honour of having been the first humble moderator of his Church in the West, and above all the pioneer minister to the Highlanders in the well-beloved parish of Kildonan on the Red River.

